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Lawrence Nees

The Iconographic Program of Decorated Chancel Barriers in the pre-Iconoclastic Period

Perhaps the single most distinctive feature of the interior of an Orthodox church is the ornate chancel screen commonly known as the iconostasis, but the early history of the decorated chancel barrier remains a subject much disputed by scholars[1]. The problem is aggravated by a persistent lack of uniformity in the use of the term iconostasis, restricted by some to the high wall completely separating the congregation from the sanctuary as employed in the modern period, the usage I myself prefer and will employ here, while others use it in a looser sense to refer to any chancel barrier (or *templon*) bearing figural decoration. Yet the differences among scholars are also substantive in nature. The extreme position enunciated in the early years of the twentieth century by Karl Holl, that a fully-developed iconostasis already existed as early as Justinian's Hagia Sophia in the sixth century, and indeed could be traced back directly to much earlier Greek theatre architecture, has generally found little support[2]. Since that time a number of scholars have however developed solid evidence for the view that at least by the ninth or tenth century in the Byzantine church the chancel barrier was already commonly equipped with a series of icons in various materials[3], and although probably not yet a high wall blocking the congregation's view of the altar[4], a general iconographic program was well established. This program often involved representations of the major liturgical Feasts of the church, and generally included as a central feature the Deesis, Christ between the praying figures of the Virgin and John the Baptist, with archangels, apostles and saints flanking the central group[5]. Several scholars have suggested that the Deesis program may in fact be traced back to the pre-Iconoclastic period, and it is this »early Deesis iconography« theory that I would like to briefly review here, taking into account some new material evidence recently excavated and a new interpretation of a written source recently published.

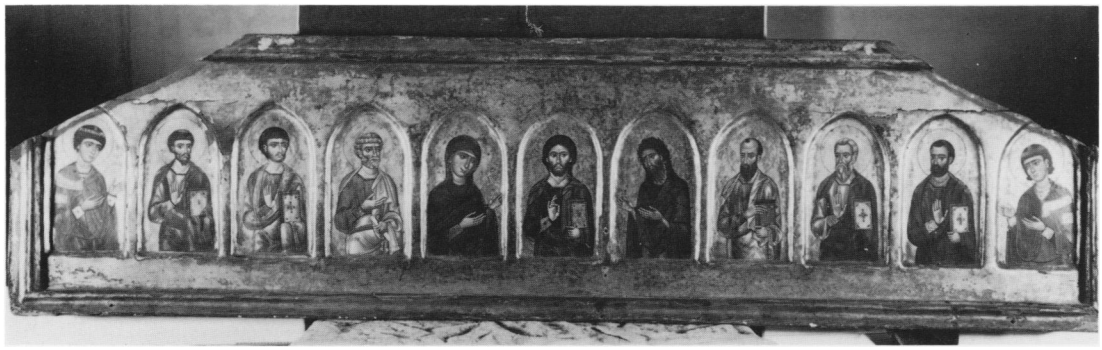
[1] The most recent and best general introduction to the subject, with extensive bibliography, is the article by Ann Wharton Epstein, »The Middle Byzantine Sanctuary Barrier: Templon or Iconostasis?« *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 134 (1981), 1–28, which reached me only after this article was in press and too late for systematic incorporation. I would like to thank Prof. Anthony Cutler for calling my attention to this important study. I would especially like to express my gratutude for the generous support of the University of Pennsylvania, this paper having been written under the ideal conditions provided there during my tenure as a Mellon Fellow in the Humanities for 1981–1982.

[2] Karl Holl, »Die Entstehung der Bilderwand in der griechischen Kirche,« *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 9 (1906), 365–384. The theory was briefly but persuasively rebutted by Edmund Wiegand, »Die Ikonostase der justinianischen Sophienkirche,« *Kunstchronik* 2 (1949), 209–210, but was recently quoted without explicit disagreement by George Galavaris, *Icons from the Elvehjem Art Center* (exhibition catalogue, The Elvehjem Art Center, University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1973), p. 7.

[3] Kurt Weitzmann, »Die byzantinischen Elfenbeine eines Bamberger Graduale und ihre ursprüngliche Verwendung,« in *Studien zur Buchmalerei und Goldschmiedekunst des Mittelalters. Festschrift für Karl Hermann Usener zum 60. Geburtstag am 19. August 1965*, ed. Frieda Dettweiler *et al.* (Marburg an der Lahn, 1967), pp. 11–20, reprinted in Kurt Weitzmann, *Byzantine Book Illumination and Ivories* (London, 1980), no. VII. Of course this should not be taken to imply that the chancel barrier always received such a figural program. In this paper I make no attempt to touch upon the complex question of the architectural form and liturgical use of the chancel barrier; for these problems and for a discussion of aniconic screens see the excellent study by A. H. S. Megaw, »The Skripou Screen,« *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 61 (1966), 1–31. I would like to thank Prof. C. L. Striker for bringing this article to my attention.

[4] Manolis Chatzidakis, »Εἰκονες ἐπιστυλίον ἀπὸ τὸ Ἁγιου Ὄρος,« 4,4 (1964–65), 377ff., reprinted in his *Studies in Byzantine Art and Archacology* (London, 1972), no. XVIII, and Galavaris, *Icons* (above, note 2), p. 8.

[5] The bibliography on the Deesis is vast and need not be surveyed here. A general discussion is by Th. von Bogyay, »Deesis,« in *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst* 1 (Stuttgart, 1966), cols. 1178–1186. To the older bibliography there cited should be added Doula Mouriki, »A Deesis Icon in the Art Museum,« *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 27 (1968), 13–28, two important articles by Christopher Walter, »Two Notes on the Deesis,« *Revue des études byzantines* 26 (1968), 311–337, and »Further Notes on the Deesis,« *Revue des études byzantines* 28 (1970), 161–187, and especially the extended study and critical review of the previous literature by Maria Andaloro, »Note sui temi iconografici della Deesis e della Hagiosoritissa,« *Rivista dell' Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell' Arte* 17 (1970), 85–153, especially pp. 93–97.



1. Chancel barrier with Deesis, Apostles and Saints. Crusader painting, 13th c., Mount Sinai

Critical to this entire problem of the decorated chancel screen in the early Byzantine period is the interpretation of the poem by Paulus Silentiarius concerning Justinian's Hagia Sophia, which describes the chancel barrier at considerable length. Written after the collapse of the great dome in 558, the poem was probably recited for the re-consecration of the Great Church in 563[6]. Although posing difficult problems for the archaeologist or art historian who would like to understand it, the description does clearly refer to carved images of Christ, angels, prophets, apostles, and the Virgin placed somewhere »on the columns«[7]. This list of figures corresponds rather closely to some later chancel screens and other works of Byzantine art such as ivory triptychs, and in a splendid article Kurt Weitzmann reconstructed a tenth-century chancel barrier with ivory plaques forming a Deesis, also comprising images of Christ, angels, apostles and the Virgin, an arrangement perhaps best paralleled among surviving complete chancel barriers by a Crusader painting on Mount Sinai (fig. 1). Almost as an afterthought Weitzmann tentatively offered the hypothesis that, although certainly one cannot expect to find the fully developed program of the Prayer of Intercession (the Deesis) in the Justinianic period, the Hagia Sophia decoration presented a »prelude« to the Middle

[6] Paul Friedländer, ed., *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius, Kunstbeschreibungen Justinianischer Zeit* (Leipzig/Berlin, 1912), p. 110. A convenient modern English translation is now available in Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453*, Sources and Documents in the History of Art Series (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1972), p. 87.

[7] The fundamental analysis of the text and reconstruction of the chancel barrier it describes, which has won wide acceptance, is by Stephen G. Xydis, »The Chancel Barrier, Solea, and Ambo of Hagia Sophia,« *Art Bulletin* 29 (1947), 1–24. The reconstruction of the chancel barrier has been reviewed more recently by Thomas F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: architecture and liturgy* (University Park, 1971), pp. 96–98, with a discussion of some new archaeological findings which do not however bear on the iconographic problem here under discussion, a problem not addressed by Mathews. It should be noted that Xydis's proposed textual emendation concerning the form of the image frames, resulting in a reconstruction with circular medallions rather than elongated ovals, which has been accepted by most subsequent scholars, was rejected on philological grounds by Johannes Koder in an appendix to Karoline Kreidl-Papadopoulos, »Bemerkungen zum justinianischen Templon der Sophienkirche in Konstantinopel,« *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 17 (1968), 279–289. This point plays an important role in Kreidl-Papadopoulos's iconographic study, which envisages a multi-layered composition on the front of the screen, probably depicting a scenic image perhaps similar to the Ascension represented on several Palestinian ampullae and in the well-known miniature of the Rabbula Gospels, which presents the same cast of characters. I find this reconstruction extremely unlikely for many reasons. First a multi-tiered scenic image seems grossly anachronistic in general terms for one of the earliest chancel screens bearing figural decoration of any kind whatever, and also it is quite inconsistent with the layout of the space, since the solea and ambo also on the central axis directly before the center of the chancel screen would allow no clear view of this area from the nave of the church. Paulus Silentiarius provides no positive support for such a reconstruction, which is rather surprising since we are then driven to conclude that he either entirely missed the main point of so magnificent and central a decorative program or else simply chose to ignore it. Also Kreidl-Papadopoulos's interpretation requires us to accept a singularly tortured interpretation of Paulus Silentiarius's term »elsewhere« describing the location of the Virgin, as actually signifying »below.« Finally there seems to be no plausible reason to actually connect the supposedly related images (ampullae and so forth) to the decoration of chancel screens.

Byzantine iconography[8]. Weitzmann did not however attempt to specify the precise nature of this prelude or discuss exactly how it was connected to the later arrangement, but some other scholars have gone so far as to conclude that the Deesis was the likely subject of the Hagia Sophia screen[9]. Additional support for this »early Deesis« idea has appeared more recently in Weitzmann's interpretation of the three medallions of the triumphal arch of Justinian's church at Mount Sinai as a kind of Deesis[10]. Yet before the theory that the Deesis decorated early chancel screens gains wider currency, and thereby inevitably sheds the wise circumspection with which it was first proposed, it

2. Christ. Marble panel from chancel barrier at St. Polyeuktos, Istanbul

3. Virgin and Child. Marble panel from chancel barrier at St. Polyeuktos, Istanbul

[8] Weitzmann, »Bamberger Graduale« (above, note 3), pp. 14–15 and especially p. 19. Of course it is necessary, in order to see the close connection here, to follow the suggestion by Weitzmann (and by Xydis, »Chancel Barrier« p. 11) that John the Baptist was simply included within the category of prophets. To my mind this seems forced; if given special prominence in the decoration, one would expect the Baptist to have been specifically mentioned in the description by Paulus Silentiarius, who is rather more inclined to prolixity than undue terseness. Weitzmann has himself offered a slightly revised version of the reconstructed ivory chancel barrier, including Feast icons, in an interesting article which does not however shed further light on the problem here under discussion; see Kurt Weitzmann, »Diptikh slonovoi kosti iz Ermitazha, otnosyashchiisya k krugu Imperatora Roman,« *Vizantiiski Vremennik* 32 (1971), 142–155, reprinted as »An Ivory Diptych of the Romanos Group in the Hermitage,« in Kurt Weitzmann, *Byzantine Book Illumination and Ivories* (London, 1980), no. VIII.

[9] Xydis, »Chancel Barrier,« p. 11, made this suggestion rather tentatively, but unambigous support for the Deesis interpretation of the Hagia Sophia images was given in the important article by Viktor Lasareff, »Trois fragments d' Epistyles peintes et le Templon byzantine,« Δελτίον Χριστιανικῆς Ἀρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας 4,4 (1964–65), 117ff., especially p. 122. Although his language is rather vague and elliptical, a similar view appears to be expressed by Galavaris, *Icons*, p. 7. In a similarly tentative fashion Tania Velmans observed that the text of Paulus Silentiarius »permet de supposer que le thème de l'intercession figure déjà sur le templon de Sainte-Sophie à Constantinople,« in her article »L'image de la Déisis dans les églises de Géorgie et dans celles d'autres régions du monde byzantin,« *Cahiers archéologiques* 29 (1980–81), p. 51 note 31. The scholarly differences of opinion were noted without expression of personal preference for either side of the debale in the survey by Manolis Chatzidakis, »Ikonsstas,« *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst* 3 (Stuttgart, 1978), cols. 329–330.

[10] George H. Forsyth and Kurt Weitzmann, *The Church and Fortress of Justinian*, The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai (Ann Arbor, 1973), plate volume, p. 15. Von Bogyay, »Deesis« (above, note 5), col. 1181, calls attention to the unusual arrangement with the Virgin at the left of the Lamb in this mosaic, and stresses that this is a purely »heavenly« representation, with no theme or function of intercession.

4. Apostle A. Marble panel from chancel barrier at St. Polyeuktos, Istanbul

5. Apostle F. Marble panel from chancel barrier at St. Polyeuktos, Istanbul

ought to receive careful scrutiny both on its own terms and in comparison to other possible interpretations of the available evidence.

Following upon a chance discovery in 1960, several campaigns of excavation have been carried out at Saraçhane in Istanbul, revealing remains of the early Byzantine church of St. Polyeuktos. This church was founded by Eudocia in the first half of the fifth century and extensively rebuilt by Anicia Juliana probably between 524 and 527[11]. The third campaign of excavation in 1966 unearthed a series of small marble reliefs (roughly 37 × 35 cm on average) carved with figures, including Christ (fig. 2) the Virgin carrying the Infant Christ (fig. 3), and four apostles (fig. 4), all presented in half-length[12]. Three additional figure of apostles were found in 1968[13], bringing the total number of apostles to seven (fig. 5), or eight if the excavators are correct in identifying a very small fragment found in 1966 as part of the series. The original position of these reliefs atop a *templon* or chancel barrier was suggested only very tentatively by the excavators, but the polishing of the back of each panel and the provision of a square dowel on the bottom does seem to render such an interpretation quite plausible, if still inevitably hypothetical, and it has been accepted at least tacitly by both André Grabar and Manolis Chatzidakis[14]. Although the church as a whole survived until the thirteenth century, the deliberate destruction of all the faces renders the outbreak of Iconoclasm a strong *terminus ante quem*, and they have accordingly been dated by both the excavators and by Grabar in the late sixth or seventh century, the latter providing some stylistic comparisons[15]. These relief from St. Polyeuk-

[11] Cyril Mango and Ihor Ševčenko, »Remains of the Church of St. Polyeuktos at Constantinople,« *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 15 (1961), 243–247.

[12] R. Martin Harrison and Nezih Firatli, »Excavations at Saraçhane in Istanbul: second and third preliminary reports,« *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 20 (1966), 222–238, especially p. 235 and figs. 33–38.

[13] R. Martin Harrison and Nezih Firatli, »Excavations at Saraçhane in Istanbul: fifth preliminary report,« *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 22 (1968), 195–216, especially p. 199 and figs. 10–12.

[14] André Grabar, »Recherches sur les sculptures de l' Hypogée des Dunes, à Poitiers, et de la crypte Saint-Paul de Jouarre,« *Journal des Savants* (1974), 3–43, especially pp. 38–41 and figs. 22–24, and Chatzidakis, »Ikonostas« (above, note 9), col. 330. The St. Polyeuktos reliefs were mentioned in passing by Cyril Mango, who commented on their rude quality and later (than the sixth century) date, but did not address their possible function, presumably therefore raising no objection to their association with the chancel barrier, in »Storia dell' arte,« in *La Civiltà bizantina dal IV al IX secolo, Aspetti e problemi*, Università degli studi di Bari, Centro di studi bizantini, Corsi di studi 1, 1976 (Bari, 1977), pp. 316–321.

[15] Harrison and Firatli, »Saraçhane III,« p. 235. The pre-Iconoclastic date was also accepted by Grabar, »Recherches,« p. 40.

tos therefore constitute the first possible physical evidence for the figured chancel screen in the pre-Iconoclastic period. The subjects, Christ, Virgin and apostles, do indeed appear to relate closely to those mentioned in Paulus Silentiarius's description of the chancel screen of Hagia Sophia, but it is important to note that the subjects do not include the image of John the Baptist, or indeed of any prophets whatsoever, and therefore the iconography simply cannot be termed a Deesis in the usual sense of the term[16].

In the face of this newly discovered group of plaques, what should be said concerning the related program of the chancel screen of Hagia Sophia, known only from literary description? Certainly it is true that the far smaller available space at St. Polyeuktos would have made a reduction of the number of holy figures presented in the Hagia Sophia scheme desirable, even if the designer at St. Polyeuktos had wished to present the same basic iconographic program. Yet the fact remains that enough room was certainly available to include at least the single figure of John the Baptist had he been regarded as an essential part of the iconographic unit. Since he was not in fact included at St. Polyeuktos to the best of our present knowledge, one must assume that he was not so regarded. The natural inference is then that the arrangement of the figures on the chancel screen at Hagia Sophia was likewise not at all an organized version of the liturgically-based intercession prayer ordinarily associated with the Deesis, but more simply an hierarchical array of various classes of sacred personnages. After all, the intercession idea suggests a pictorialization with the intercessors addressing their prayers directly to Christ and therefore physically turning toward him, as is consistently the case with Middle Byzantine images of the Deesis. Indeed the distinct turning of all the figures except Christ was an important factor in Weitzmann's reconstruction of the Bamberg ivories as a Deesis composition in the first place[17]. In this light it is striking to observe that all of the figures in the St. Polyeuktos reliefs are depicted frontally, a feature which surely cannot be dismissed purely on the basis of the stylistic preference for rigid frontal poses which is frequently observable in some but certainly not in all works of the later sixth and seventh century[18]. The St. Polyeuktos reliefs were depicted frontally rather than facing toward Christ because they were never conceived as elements of a unified composition, a »great Deesis«[19]. That the Hagia Sophia figures were likely conceived along the same lines may then be surmised both by simple analogy, and because the almost indubitably later and much cruder St. Polyeuktos reliefs are very likely direct reflections of the now lost images from the Great Church.

Even without introducing the evidence of the newly discovered reliefs from St. Polyeuktos it seems to me that a Deesis composition can scarcely be envisaged on the sixth-century chancel barrier of Hagia Sophia, since the description of Paulus Silentiarius itself implies a decentralized paratactic composition. Inevitably Christ is described first and is said to occupy the center, presumably over the central doorway[20], and the angels are in fact clearly described as bowing their heads before him, a motif which does suggest that they at least do face toward him[21]. Yet the Virgin is mentioned only after the prophets and apostles, and that this displacement is due to more than a poet's problem with the meter of the verse is proven by the unambiguous statement that her image was »elsewhere,« a term which induced Stephen Xydis to suggest that her image was most likely to be found over one of the lateral doors, and thus not even on the same side of the barrier as Christ[22]. It is worth noting in this connection that the medallion on the triumphal arch mosaic at Mount Sinai plausibly

[16] Chatzidakis, »Ikonostas,« col. 330, also pointed out that the St. Polyeuktos reliefs do not constitute a Deesis, but does not discuss the implications of this finding. Kreidl-Papadopoulos, »Bemerkungen« (above, note 7), p. 285, also rejected the Deesis reconstruction.

[17] Weitzmann, »Bamberger Graduale,« p. 14.

[18] Ernst Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making. Main lines of stylistic development in Mediterranean Art 3rd-7th Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), pp. 101–105. For a splendid discussion of the three-quarter view as the concrete expression of interaction between figures, see Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration. Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (Boston, 1955), pp. 7, 28 and 50. For a very interesting general discussion of frontality in medieval art see Meyer Schapiro, *Words and Pictures. On the Literal and Symbolic Illustration of a Text* (The Hague, 1973), pp. 37–49.

[19] The same reasoning leads to the conclusion that they did not form any other sort of »scenic« composition, as was proposed for Hagia Sophia by Kreidl-Papadopoulos, »Bemerkungen,« pp. 284–285.

[20] Xydis, »Chancel Barrier,« p. 9.

[21] This feature is reminiscent of compositions such as that on the central triumphal arch at Mount Sinai, presenting two flying angels carrying the central medallion, with Agnus Dei. Thus the »bowing« attitude of the angels very likely represents not the impact of the liturgy but simply the continuation of the Roman composition of the Victories bearing *imagines clipeata*.

identified by Weitzmann as the Virgin and possibly involved in a kind of Deesis image, likewise does not face toward the medallion with the *Agnus Dei,* but is depicted frontally[23]. If these images should be described as Deesis compositions, that term needs to be construed very loosely indeed, so loosely as to lose its special significance and to cause needless confusion[24].

Other arguments may also be brought forward against the hypothesis that any pre-Iconoclastic chancel barries were decorated with Deesis images based on the intercessory prayers of the liturgy. The liturgical connection itself presents something of a problem, and even though only a competent liturgist could treat the question adequately it deserves at least some mention here. The Middle Byzantine Deesis image does certainly correspond quite closely to the pattern of the intercessory prayers contained in the liturgy, specifically to the prayers in the *prothesis,* which mention first the Virgin, then the archangels, John the Baptist, the apostles, and various saints (but not the prophets as a class). Unfortunately for the proponents of the »early Deesis« theory, the *prothesis* as a whole cannot be traced earlier than roughly the eleventh century, and certainly cannot be traced back to the pre-Iconoclastic period[25]. On the other hand, the far older intercessory or commemorative prayers of the *anaphora* begin with an extensive list of forefathers, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles and other saints before proceeding to the Virgin and Baptist, and they thus correspond less convincingly with the visual Deesis images[26]. This cannot conclusively prove, but does suggest that the pre-Iconoclastic chancel barriers were not decorated with the Deesis compositon, or at least that if they were then the form of the Deesis was at that time not connected with the liturgical prayers of intercession. If this latter line of argument is accepted, it would lend additional weight to Christopher Walter's view that despite its clear later interpretation as a votive intercessory image, the origin of the Deesis composition should be sought not in the liturgical prayers but rather in the looser and more flexible conception of the court of Heaven paying tribute to the Glory of Christ[27].

It would probably be a mistake to assume a complete iconographic consistency in the decoration of chancel barriers in the pre-Iconoclastic period. If the St. Polyeuktos figures did not form a Deesis ensembles, as seems to me quite evident, the figures at Hagia Sophia may still be thought to have done so. With only these two examples to weigh, each example being somewhat difficult to interpret in its own right, the power of the rather crude reliefs of St. Polyeuktos to attract our iconographic interpretation of the great lost silver figures of Hagia Sophia is limited. However, I believe it is now possible to add to the balance a third example of a pre-Iconoclastic chancel barrier whose program of decoration is known from literary testimony. For this third example it is necessary to turn to a distant and at first a seemingly unlikely source from the other end of the Christian world.

In his *Lives of the Abbots,* written between 716 and 735, the Venerable Bede described at some length the treasures brought to the monastery of St. Peter at Monkwearmouth in Northumbria by its founder Benedict Biscop in ca. 678[28]. Listed in fifth place among these treasures were pictures *(picturae)* of the Virgin and of the twelve apostles, *»quibus mediam eiusdem aecclesiae testitudinem, ducto a pariete ad parietem tabulato praecingeret.«* Like the description by Paulus Silentiarius of Hagia Sophia, these words of Bede have been translated and interpreted in different ways, but in an important recent article Paul Meyvaert has offered an interpretation based on philological considerations which I find quite convincing. In brief, Meyvaert argues that these images were brought to Northumbria directly from Rome,[29]

[22] Xydis, »Chancel Barrier,« p. 11. Forsyth and Weitzmann, *Church and Fortress,* pls. CIII, CXXIII and CXXV.

[24] The precise meaning of the term Deesis is in fact nearly as great a problem as is that of the term iconostasis; see especially Walter, »Two Notes« (above, note 5).

[25] Casimir Kucharek, *The Byzantine-Slav Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Allendale, N. J., 1971), pp. 279–298.

[26] Kucharek, *Liturgy,* pp. 624–634. The length and rather disorganized impression of this list recalls similar invocations from the period of roughly the seventh and eighth century in a great number of early Irish prayers. See Raymund Kottje, *Studien zum Einfluss des Alten Testaments auf Recht und Liturgie des frühen Mittelalters, 6.-8. Jahrhundert,* Bonner historische Forschungen 23 (Bonn, 1964), pp. 19–21.

[27] Walter, »Further Notes,« p. 176.

[28] Charles Plummer, ed., *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica* (Oxford, 1896), pp. 369–370. Among many English translations I mention only that by James Campbell, *Bede, The Ecclesiastical History of the English People and Other Selections* (New York, 1968), p. 376, and that by Caecilia Davis-Weyer, *Early Medieval Art 300–1150,* Sources and Documents in the History of Art Series (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1971), p. 74.

[29] Paul Meyvaert, »Bede and the church paintings at Wearmouth-Jarrow,« *Anglo-Saxon England* 8

6. Twelve Apostles. Side of Coffin of St. Cuthbert

that by *picturae* Bede clearly means not illuminated manuscripts[30] but painted wooden panels of at least moderate size[31], that the thirteen separate panels were joined together to form a continuous plank or beam of some sort *(tabulatum)*,[32] and that this *tabulatum* was stretched beneath the arch marking the entrance from the nave to the santuary, probably decorating the top of a chancel barrier[33].

If Meyvaert's interpretation of Bede's text is accepted, one must conclude that Benedict Biscop acquired in Rome in the 670's a series of painted panels depicting the Virgin and the twelve apostles, designed to run across the top of the chancel screen. This reconstruction, made without reference to the art historical debate concerning chancel barriers and thus of enhanced independent value, corresponds remarkably closely to the recently discovered fragments from St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople. They are of approximately the same date, also appear to have decorated the top of a chancel screen, and also presented the apostles and the Virgin on a collection of separate panels.

Even in regard to their approximate scale the reliefs from St. Polyeuktos appear to nearly match those from Monkwearmouth; the St. Polyeuktos reliefs average roughly 34 cm in breadth, while Meyvaert plausibly calculated the Monkwearmouth panels as no more than 17 in., that is approximately 43 cm, in breadth at the maximum, and most probably somewhat less[34]. Only the image of Christ is (rather strangely) absent from the *tabulatum* described by Bede. Perhaps one should imagine that the figure of the Virgin described by Bede carried the Christ child before her, as at St. Polyeuktos, but this is merely fanciful speculation, and it is probably both unwise and unnecessary to expect any exact correspondence. Nevertheless one rather surprising piece of concrete evidence does support the hypothesis of an extremely close association between the lost Romano-Northumbrian chancel screen and the surviving fragments of the decorated chancel barrier from St. Polyeuktos.

The wooden coffin-reliquary of St. Cuthbert carved in Northumbria and possibly at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow around the year 698, that is about two decades after the installation of the Roman chancel barrier there, bears a complex and highly puzzling figural decoration. On the lid is depicted Christ in Majesty, surrounded by the four symbols of the evangelists, on the foot the Virgin with the Christ child, on the head and along one of the long sides full-length figures of the seven archangels, and on the other long side the twelve apostles. The apostles are arranged as half-length figures in a double frieze (fig. 6), in a manner which forms an interesting parallel to a long chancel beam such as the Crusader painting from Mount Sinai (fig. 1), if one imagines the twelve figures stretched out into a single strip. In his very detailed and profound study of the Cuthbert coffin-reliquary, Ernst Kitzinger considered the possibility that this series of apostles might be related to the Roman panels described by Bede,

(1979), 63–77, especially pp. 64–67, rejecting the mistaken conclusion by a number of previous scholars that these images may have been brought from Gaul instead.

[30] As had been suggested by Adolph Goldschmidt, *An Early Manuscript of the Aesop Fables of Avianus and Related Manuscripts,* Studies in Manuscript Illumination 1 (Princeton, 1947), pp. 33–34.

[31] Meyvaert, »Church paintings,« pp. 67–70.

[32] Meyvaert, »Church paintings,« pp. 70–73.

[33] Meyvaert, »Church paintings,« pp. 73–74. This is in accord with the interpretation earlier offered by Peter Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede* (New York, 1971), p. 173, as noted by Meyvaert.

[34] Meyvaert, »Church Paintings,« p. 74. He arrived at the figure by divinding the number thirteen (the number of panels) into the width of the nave of the church at Monkwearmouth, for which see H. M. Taylor and Joan Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture* 1 (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 432–446, especially p. 440.

and in fact demonstrated that the order in which the apostles appear on the reliefs is paralleled only in the Roman Canon of the Mass[35]. However, Kitzinger finally rejected this possible source for two reasons, the lack of physiognomic variation among the apostles, which led him to suspect an *ad hoc* invention based on the figures of the archangels, and the absence of good Mediterranean parallels for figures of apostles not as mere busts but instead abruptly cut off at the waist and displaying the hands[36]. The first of these objections remains troubling, although it seems to me that the Cuthbert coffin apostles are not so entirely uniform as described by Kitzinger, but certainly the then-unknown St. Polyeuktos reliefs provide just the sort of Mediterranean source previously absent, thereby eliminating the second objection.

There are some distinctions between the two sets of apostles, those on the Cuthbert coffin lacking the splendid protruding ears of the St. Polyeuktos figures, and wearing their mantles rather differently, but the overall compositional sinilarities strike me as too pervasive to be dismissed as coincidental. Since the Cuthbert coffin appears to have been displayed above the floor somewhere near the altar, it even presents some visual and functional parallels to a decorated chancel barrier, and in general I think it fair to say that the St. Polyeuktos reliefs in fact constitute the closest parallels of any sort that can be cited for the Cuthbert coffin reliefs. The most reasonable explanation for this close relationship is to see the Cuthbert coffin apostles of ca. 698 as a conscious and on the whole reasonably accurate reproduction, or at the very least emulation, of the painted chancel screen brought to Monkwearmouth from Rome by Benedict Biscop in 678, and in turn to see that seventh-century Roman chancel barrier as a close reflection of contemporary Byzantine practice, as witnessed now by the reliefs discovered at St. Polyeuktos. In view of the very close relationship between Roman and Constantinopolitan art during the seventh century, this similarity should not be especially surprising,[37] and the result is incidentally to provide a rather startling affirmation of the continued maintenance of some close artistic contacts right across the Christian world even to the end of the seventh century[38].

[35] Ernst Kitzinger, »The Coffin-Reliquary,« in *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. C. F. Battiscombe (Oxford/London, 1956), pp. 202–304, especially pp. 265–273 and pl. VIII.

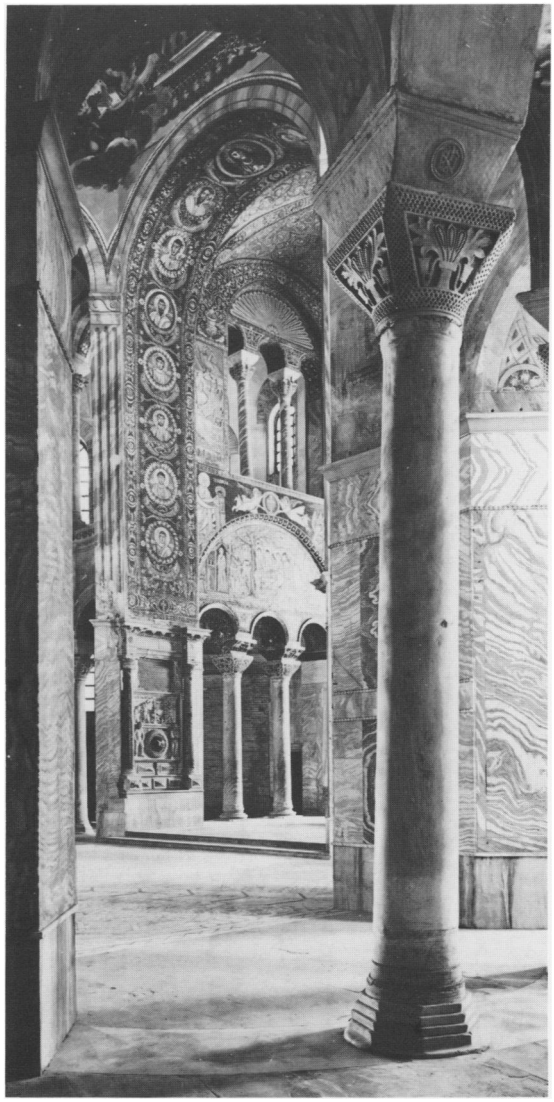
[36] Kitzinger, »Coffin-Reliquary,« p. 267 and note 3. See now also an the apostle series, Dorothy G. Shepherd, »An Icon of the Virgin: A Sixth – Century Tapestry Panel from Egypt,« *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 56, 3 (1969), 90–120, especially 100–104.

[37] For the historical background see the excellent summary by Peter Llewellyn, *Rome in the Dark Ages* (London, 1970), pp. 141–172. For the art historical situation see Ernst Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art* (above, note 18), pp. 113–118, and Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312–1308* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 89–108, with the older bibliography. Specifically Krautheimer refers to the description in the *Liber pontificalis* of a number of icons set up on chancel barriers in Rome during the seventh century (p. 91), and describes this new development as but one of many Eastern features incorporated in the Roman liturgy at that time (p. 106). The gift to St. Peter's by Pope Gregory III (731–741) of a silver architrave including images of Christ, the Virgin and apostles strikes me as particularly reminiscent of the Hagia Sophia chancel barrier, and at the same time provides some evidence that this basic iconographic arrangement was widespread and formed a continuous tradition from the sixth into the eighth century; see L. Duchesne, *Le Liber pontificalis* 1 (Paris, 1955), p. 417.

[38] Because the connections with contemporary art seem so strong in both general and specific terms, it seems to me far more likely that the lost seventh-century Roman chancel barriers are the result of Eastern influence and do not constitute a survival or revival of an indigenous Roman tradition. The evidence for the possible existence of such a tradition involves the complex problem of the *fastigium* given by Constantine to the Lateran basilica in the fourth century. According to the *Liber pontificalis* (I, 172), this great silver treasure stood at or near the altar and included a figure of Christ with the twelve Apostles (as well as another figure of Christ flanked by spear-bearing angels on the back, facing the apse). Traditionally the description has been assumed to refer to some sort of ciborium similar to that of St. Peter's, but recently an alternative reconstruction as a screen colonnade before the apse was proposed by Molly Teasdale Smith, »The Lateran *fastigium*. A Gift of Constantine the Great,« *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 46 (1970), 149–175, especially fig. 3, the author's reconstruction drawing. The reconstruction is quite interesting and I think plausible, and has been endorsed as the more likely alternative in Richard Krautheimer, Spencer Corbett, and Alfred K. Frazer, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae 5* (Rome, 1977), pp. 88–89. If accepted it would indeed provide a Roman precedent for a colonnaded screen with figures of Christ and the apostles set up near the altar. However, a number of factors lead me to reject it as a possible direct source for the seventh-century chancel barriers here under consideration. First, the *fastigium* was apparently destroyed by Alaric in 410, and the restoration under Valentian II in the 430's makes no mention of figures, while Teasdale Smith's ingenious suggestion that the figures may actually have survived into the sixteenth century (pp. 172–173) seems a dubious proposition even if not altogether impossible. In any event, the Lateran *fastigium* stood behind rather than before the altar,

Neither the chancel barrier panels described by Bede nor those discovered at St. Polyeuktos include John the Baptist or for that matter any prophets, or indicate in any way an association with the later Deesis iconography or with the liturgical prayer of intercession. Instead both compare very closely with the series of medallions with Christ and the twelve apostles decorating the arch separating chancel and nave in the mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna (fig. 7), below which there must have been a chancel barrier or screen of some sort in the sixth century, probably limited to aniconic decoration[39]. If this analogy provides a clue to the origin of the program of the decorated chancel barrier, it suggests that without substantially changing the essential iconographic content displayed at the crossing between nave and sanctuary, the artists of the later sixth and seventh century altered the form and position of the images, bringing them physically closer to the viewer as something more like icons. This reconstruction of the development would be consistent with salient developments of the later sixth and seventh centuries in Byzantine art[40], and would at the same time represent a first step in the direction of the theme of personal intercession developed liturgically in the Deesis iconography of post-Iconoclastic Byzantine chancel barriers.

In summary, I would advance four basic arguments in favor of the hypothesis that decorated chancel barriers with figures in the pre-Iconoclastic period did not present the Deesis iconography known from Middle Byzantine art[41], but instead displayed a rather more flexible array of sacred figures including Christ and/or the Virgin, apostles, and on occasion expanded to include also an-



7. Christ and Apostles. Mosaic on chancel arch, San Vitale, Ravenna

as Teasdale Smith convincingly demonstrates, and its monumental (5 ft. high) figures probably stood beneath rather than on top of the architrave, so that in no respect does the *fastigium* offer a convincing parallel to the later seventh-century chancel barriers as described by Bede and discovered in Constantinople.

[39] The iconographic relationship as »court of Heaven« images between the San Vitale mosaics and Paulus Silentiarius's description of the Hagia Sophia chancel barrier was already noted by Walter, »Further Notes« (above, note 5), p. 176; it is striking that he was able to draw this connection even without reference to the reliefs of St. Polyeuktos and the description by Bede, which clearly occupy an intermediate position between San Vitale and Hagia Sophia.

[40] Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art,* pp. 105–107.

[41] I should say here that a number of chancel barriers with Deesis iconography have been cited in connection with the Hagia Sophia screen by scholars, for example Xydis, »Chancel Barrier,« p. 11, Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire* (above, note 6), p. 87 note 154, and Galavaris, *Icons* (above, note 2), p. 7. However, to the best of my knowledge none of these are pre-Iconoclastic in date (see also Megaw, »Skripou Screen« [above, note 3], note 115), and hence not truly relevant to the pre-Iconoclastic iconographic program. Probably the most interesting of these early post-Iconoclastic chancel barriers brought to light in recent years is the marble epistyle with medallions of Christ, the Virgin, John the Baptist, archangels, apostles and one saint, found at Sebaste in Asia Minor; see Nezih Firatli, »Découverte d'une église byzantine à Sébaste de Phrygie,« *Cahiers archéologiques* 19 (1969), 151–166, especially 161 and figs. 14–22.

gels and prophets. 1) The liturgical prayers of intercession most closely related to the Deesis image cannot be shown to be pre-Iconoclastic in date. 2) The description of the Hagia Sophia chancel screen by Paulus Silentiarius suggests a rather dispersed compostion, with the Virigin in no way closely related to Christ, as is invariably the case in surviving Deesis compositions. 3) The figures on the only possible surviving pre-Iconoclastic chancel barrier, from St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople, are uniformly rendered frontally, and in no way indicate a unified composition with the theme of intercessory prayer. 4) Of the three recoverable iconographic programs of pre-Iconoclastic decorated chancel barriers, two (St. Polyeuktos and the Roman *tabulatum* brought to Northumbria and described by Bede) entirely lack the figure of John the Baptist or any other prophets, suggesting that the prophets (possibly but by no means certainly including the Baptist) and angels in the third example (Hagia Sophia) are not essential iconographic components as in the Middle Byzantine Deesis images, but rather represent optional extensions of the basic program.

Logically it cannot be possible to decisively prove the negative conclusion that something very like the familiar Middle Byzantine Deesis composition did not occur on any pre-Iconoclastic chancel barrier, but I hope to have exposed some weaknesses of the arguments hitherto advanced for their existence, while at the same time providing what seems to me a more plausible alternative hypothesis. It also seems to me that to remove the fully-developed Deesis iconography altogether from the pre-Iconoclastic period better accords with the general view of the character of Early as opposed to Middle Byzantine art which has emerged in the last few decades. The developed Deesis image is heavily impregnated with liturgical associations, has in fact been termed a liturgical image, and among others Kurt Weitzmann has demonstrated in a number of important articles the extent to which the liturgy became a dominant shaping force in Byzantine art in the Middle Byzantine period[42]. The »classical« Middle Byzantine scheme of church decoration analyzed by Otto Demus presents a similar picture, with the liturgical connections of the images playing a critical role in both the development and the interpretation of this scene in the period after Iconoclasm[43]. On the other hand the looser hierarchical scheme here proposed for the Early Byzantine chancel barrier recalls the continuing influence of late Roman imperial iconography especially in Justinianic art[44], as well as the impact of Neoplatonic hierarchical conceptions as most notably applied to the figural program of the Cathedral of Edessa in a now well-known Syriac hymn of the later sixth century[45].

In the light of these comments it is worth returning to Weitzmann's suggestion that the decoration of the chancel barrier erected in Justinian's Hagia Sophia ca. 560 constituted a kind of »prelude« to the later development of the iconostasis in the Orthodox churches. As stated by Weitzmann I would in fact agree with this formulation, but only with the clear understanding that although based on similar raw material that »prelude« formed a distinct contrast to the later development, which constitutes a variation on the theme and carries it into an entirely new key. This point is of some importance, since a number of recent studies have argued for the remarkable degree to which Middle Byzantine works could in some instances carefully and deliberately reproduce the form of pre-Iconoclastic models[46]. But, to utilize

[42] Kurt Weitzmann, »Byzantine Miniature and Icon Painting in the Eleventh Century,« *Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 207–224, reprinted in Kurt Weitzmann, *Studies in Classical and Byzantine Manuscript Illumination*, ed. Herbert L. Kessler (Chicago/London, 1971), pp. 271–334. I myself earlier discussed this point specifically in relationship to the Deesis image, in »An Illuminated Byzantine Psalter at Harvard University,« *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 29 (1975), 205–224, especially pp. 210–212 and 223–224, and notes 20–27 and 94–97, with additional bibliography.

[43] Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration* (above, note 18), pp. 13–26.

[44] See in general the classic study by André Grabar, *L'Empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Strasbourg, 1936), pp. 85–98, 230–236 and especially on the Deesis pp. 258–260.

[45] A. Dupont-Sommer, »Une hymne syriaque sur la Cathédrale d'Édesse,« *Cahiers archéologiques* 2 (1947), 29–39, with additional art historical commentary by André Grabar, »Le témoinage d'une hymne syriaque sur l'architecture de la cathédrale d'Édesse au VI^e siècle et sur la symbolique de l'édifice chrétien,« *Cahiers archéologiques 2* (1947), 41–67.

[46] Paul Underwood, »The Evidence of Restorations in the Sanctuary Mosaics of the Church of the Dormition at Nicaea,« *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 13 (1959), 235–243, and more recently Hans Belting and Guglielmo Cavallo, *Die Bibel des Niketas. Ein Werk der höfischen Buchkunst in Byzanz und sein antikes Vorbild* (Wiesbaden, 1979), especially pp. 46–48. I have myself attempted to identify the pre-Iconoclastic sources of a group of ninth and tenth century Byzantine Evangelist portraits, in *The Gundohinus Gospels at Autun* (in press).

the musical metaphor for the last time, the opening theme is always a critical element of any work as it guides and shapes later developments, and it is not by any means my intention to belittle the significance of the early program of images which decorated the chancel screen of Justinian's Hagia Sophia. Clearly Victor Lasareff was justified in describing those figures as the first and probably most significant figural decoration of the Great Church at that time[47], and in stressing their influence in the succeeding decades and centuries. This decoration announced a new departure at the very epicenter of the Byzantine world, a dramatic change in direction in the course of Byzantine art[48], and one is surely entitled to see in the St. Polyeuktos and Monkwearmouth chancel decoration the direct progeny of Hagia Sophia, as one sees in Middle Byzantine Deesis chancel barriers descendants more distant but still very much within the family.

The Significance of Canon 3 of the Council of Tours in 567

The new chancel barrier with attached images of sacred figures erected by Justinian at Hagia Sophia ca. 560 may have stimulated a reaction strong enough to have been felt almost immediately even as far away as Merovingian Francia. Canon 3 of the Council of Tours, held in 567, declared: »*Ut corpus Domini in altari non imaginario ordine, sed sub crucis titulo componatur.*«[49] This text is extremely difficult to interpret and translate, and has usually been understood as a direction to arrange the Eucharist on the paten not in an »imaginary« (that is, »arbitrary, fanciful«) fashion, but in the form of a cross. However, in an interesting recent article Robert A. Markus has again asserted the reading favored by DuCange, namely that »*imaginario ordine*« refers to an array of actual images of some sort, and that the Council accordingly is attempting to direct that the Eucharist be prepared not amid images but beneath the cross[50].

Markus related this text to the incipient cult of images in sixth-century Francia, and also suggested that it may ba taken as a protest against the development of chancel barriers furnished with sacred images in Francia at that time. He offers as support for this interpretation the evidence of the immediately following Canon 4 of the same council, which states that it is important to reserve the space near the altar for the clergy alone, seeing here the endorsement of the proper, following upon the rejection of the improper, utilization of a chancel barrier. Of course this must remain only an hypothetical interpretation of the text, on account of the extreme ambiguity of the language employed. Nevertheless I do find the suggestion quite persuasive in its broad outlines, although I would like to suggest at least one modification of some importance.

The chief objection to Markus's theory is that 567 seems simply too early a date for chancel barriers decorated with sacred figures to have appeared already on Merovingian territory. This is indeed a weighty consideration, and one difficult to set aside on the basis of such relatively uncertain literary evidence. Yet I believe that a clue to the solution of the problem may actually be provided by the tortured and annoyingly vague language as well as by the extreme brevity (it comprises but the single sentence quoted above, while several other canons run to several pages, and none are as short as this) of Canon 3 of the Council of 567. The awkwardness of this canon may reflect not only the low standards of Merovingian Latinity, but also the simple fact that the assembled clerics were condemning a new-fangled innovation which none of them had yet actually seen but of which at least one had already heard reports. Here it is important to note that the Bishop of Tours, in whose city the conclave was gathered, was Saint Eufronius, first cousin to his more famous immediate successor in the see, Gregory of Tours. Although Gregory succeeded to the bishopric of Tours only in 573, he had been deacon there since 563, and very likely attended the deliberations of the council. Scion of a great senatorial family, Gregory was especially well connected to Constantinople, and in fact is the earliest Western author to consistently use the term *iconia* for religious images[51]. The recent research of Averil Cameron has shown that Gregory of Tours can be demonstrated to have had a direct contemporary source in Constantinople, and that his accounts of Constantinopolitan events are not only reliable but in certain instances constitute our best source[52]. Finally, although it may be no more than a coincidence, the same year which saw the Council of Tours meet (in December of that year) also saw the arrival in nearby Poitiers of Venantius Fortunatus from the East[53], and it is tempting to see Fortunatus as at least the instrument by which reports of the newly decorated chancel screen of Hagia Sophia reached the clerics assembled at Tours.

Thus I would like to offer the hypothesis that Canon 3 of the Council of Tours in 567 constitutes the earliest preserved reaction to the chancel screen constructed in Hagia Sophia a few years earlier, a theory also raised by

[47] Lasareff, »Trois fragments d'Epistyles« (above, note 9), p. 123.

[48] See Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art* (above, note 18), pp. 99–122 on the period after 550 as a true watershed in the form and significance of Byzantine art.

[49] See Charles de Clerq, ed. *Concilia Galliae, a. 511–a. 695*. Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 148A (Turnholt, 1963), pp. 175–197, especially p. 178.

[50] Robert A. Markus, »The Cult of Images in Sixth-Century Gaul,« *Journal of Theological Studies* 29 (1978), 151–157, especially p. 154.

[51] Markus, »Cult of Images,« p. 156.

[52] Averil Cameron, »The Byzantine Sources of Gregory of Tours,« *Journal of Theological Studies* 26 (1975), 421–426.

[53] Averil Cameron, »The Theotokos in Sixth-Century Constantinople: A City finds its Symbol,« *Journal of Theological Studies* 29 (1978), 79–108, especially pp. 90–92.

Markus, but less favored by him than the impact of actual Frankish works. As such the canon underscores the often close connections between East and West which continued into the later years of the sixth century, while at the same time it provides an early example of an unfortunate Western and especially Frankish predilection for the quick condemnation of poorly understood events at Constantinople, such as will be seen in even more spectacular fashion in the famous controversy which produced the *Libri Carolini at the time of Charlemagne, in* close conjunction with the establishment of a separate Western Empire[54]. However, it is important to observe that Canon 3 of the Council of Tours cannot be taken as reliable evidence that actual chancel barriers in Francia were provided with any program of sacred image at this early date.

[54] See Paul Meyvaert, »The Authorship of the ›Libri Carolini.‹ Observations prompted by a recent book,« *Revue Bénédictine* 89 (1979), 29–57, which does not treat this aspect of the problem at any length, but which does provide the most recent guide to the enormous literature on this question.

Photos: Alexandria-Michigan-Princeton Archeological Expedition to Mount Sinai 1. – Elizabeth Harrison, courtesy of Martin Harrison 2, 3, 4, 5. – Durham, Cathedral Chapter and Library 6. – Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Rome 7.